DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 498 IR 013 020

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TITLE Watching the TV Audience.
PUB DATE Jul 86
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the International Television Studies Conference (London, England, July 10-12, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Audience Analysis; *Behavior Patterns; Comparative Analysis; Correlation; *Experimental Psychology; *Family Life; Foreign Countries; Measurement Techniques; Naturalistic Observation; *Television Viewing; *Videotape Recordings
IDENTIFIERS *United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Data were collected for this study of the relationship between television watching and family life via a recording device (C-Box) consisting of a television set and a video camera. Designed for the study, this device was installed in 20 homes for one week to record the viewing area in front of the television set together with information on programs being watched. Adult viewers were also asked to complete a viewing diary to estimate their presence in the room during television programs and the amount of time they spent looking at television, and to rate each program for enjoyment and impact. Analysis of the data from approximately 350 hours of videotape suggested that presence in the room and looking at television were not strongly correlated. However, when the observed values for presence and looking were correlated with reported values for enjoyment and impact, all of the variables were positive and significant. Comparisons of the diaries with the data from the videotapes showed that the former were prone to errors and the perpetuation of myths about the effects of television, while the recording techniques had the advantage in discovering how people relate to television in the privacy of their own homes. It was concluded that, only by gaining access to people's homes via the video and recording the routines and rituals associated with television watching, can researchers come to understand the role television plays in peoples' lives and its effects on them. (7 references) (CGD)

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ED293498

Paper Presented to the 1986 International
Television Studies Conference.

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WATCHING THE TV AUDIENCE

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When I first decided to study the relationship between television watching and family life I discovered that there were several methods at my disposal. One possibility was to use a questionnaire to explore what people report about their viewing habits; another was to enter their homes and to take notes on what I observed. A third possibility was to reproduce a domestic setting in the labs and to invite families to watch television while I recorded their actions with a hidden camera. After considering these alternatives and rejecting each in turn I decided to construct a device that would enable me to record what happens while people are watching TV in the privacy of their own homes.

I approached the Independent Broadcasting Authority and they generously agreed to fund the project. Together with my assistant, Roger Lamb, and our technician, Rad Babic, I constructed a box which looks like one of those TV cabinets that one used to find in people's homes some years ago. The cabinet, or C-Box as it is now known, houses an ordinary domestic television set and a half-concealed video camera. When the set is switched on the recording equipment in the cabinet produces a video recording of the viewing area in front of the TV, together with a superimposed record of the channel number, the date, the time of day and a miniaturised corner inset of the programme on the television. A stereo sound recording is also obtained[1].

After it had been tested, the C-Box was installed in twenty homes, for a week in each, and it was visited daily by the technician who changed the tape. This produced a total of something in the region of 350 hours of videotape. In half the homes the breadwinner was a professional person (e.g. doctor, teacher, priest), in the other half he or she was a non-professional person (e.g. milkman, plumber, clerk). All the families contained both parents and at least two children. The families were enlisted by two recruiters in the community who simply told people that we were studying what people do while they are watching

1. Previous attempts have been made to record TV audiences visually - once by Allen (1965) using time-lapse film, and once by Bechtel et al (1972) using video. To my knowledge this is the first time that a fully integrated piece of equipment has been installed in people's homes (see Collett, 1986).

TV, and asked them whether they would be prepared to take part. Suitable families which expressed an interest in taking part were contacted and told that the material we collected was to be used for research purposes. They were also given certain assurances. They were told that the recording equipment would only work while the TV set was switched on, that any incriminating material we happened to record would not be shown in public, and that they were at liberty to keep the tape cassette or to insist that we erase the offending section it if anything happened which they did not want anybody to see.

In designing the study we had anticipated two problems - firstly that people would be wary about allowing the cabinet into their homes, and secondly that those who agreed to take part in the study would feel awkward in front of the camera. As it happened, both of these worries turned out to be groundless. Although there were families who totally rejected the idea of us recording their every movement, most of those who were approached agreed to take part. In one case we were actually approached by someone who volunteered to have the cabinet after she had seen it in her neighbour's house. Although we expected people who took part in the study to be self-conscious, we were surprised to discover just how naturally they behaved while the television was on. A few people appeared to be on their best behaviour throughout the entire period that the cabinet was in their home, but the vast majority soon settled down after a day or two and acted as though they were watching their own television. Evidence to suggest that people were behaving quite naturally also came from other sources. Firstly people told us that they soon forgot about the camera, and secondly we happened to record numerous scenes which would not have taken place had people been aware at the time that they were being videotaped[2].

2. One particularly amusing instance of this occurred one day when the technician arrived to change the cassette in a house where the young woman was entertaining a female friend. After the technician had left, the two women struck up a conversation about him, comparing notes on his good looks. Then all of a sudden the woman of the house pointed at the cabinet and both of them yelped in horror as they realised that their discussion had been recorded.

Presence and attention

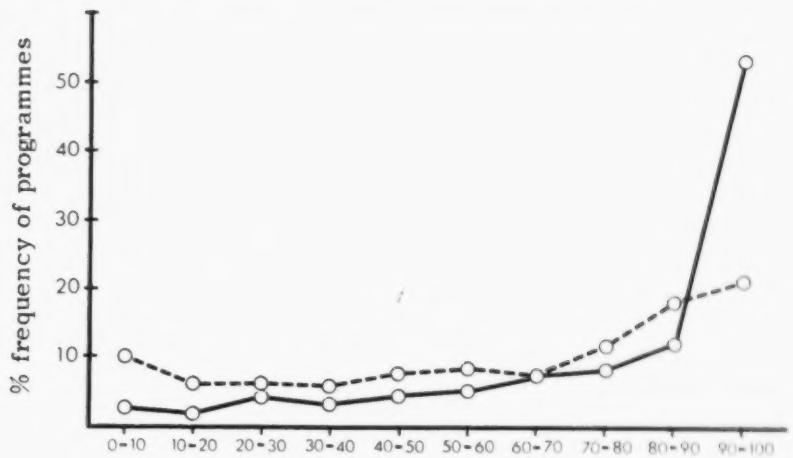
When we installed the cabinet in a home we asked the adult members of the family to complete a viewing diary, and to give estimates of the proportion of each programme that they had spent in the room as well as the proportion of each programme that they had looked at the TV screen. As soon as a cassette had been collected by the technician it was given to one of several coders who had been trained to calculate how long each adult had spent in the room and how long they had looked at the TV during each programme. When the diary entries were later compared with these data it was found that they were unreliable. Even though no attempt had been made to conceal the purpose behind the diaries, people were only correct in estimating their presence in the room on one out of every two programmes, and they were even less accurate when estimating the amount of time they looked at the TV. More detailed examination of the errors that people made when estimating their presence showed that there were about as many cases of over-estimation as under-estimation. In other words, it was not the case that people were incorrect because they simply over-estimated how long they had been in the room. Where looking was concerned, people made more errors overall, and there was a more marked tendency to over-estimate the amount of time they had spent looking at the screen. The ratios of correct to incorrect estimates, and the ratios of over-estimation to under-estimation for presence and looking are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Accuracy and error ratios for presence and looking

	Reported vs. actual presence	Reported vs. actual looking
Ratio of correct:incorrect	1.07	0.79
Ratio of over-:under-estimates	1.04	2.82

Subsequent analysis of the data for presence and looking showed that, on average, adult viewers were in the room for 80% of each programme, and that, on average, they spent 65% of the time that they were in the room with their eyes on the screen. Figure 2 shows that while the distribution of the data for presence shows a marked skew towards those occasions when people spent 90% or more of a programme in the room, the corresponding distribution for looking is relatively flat. This suggests that presence and looking are not strongly correlated. This inference is supported by the number of cases where people spend a small amount of time in the room looking at the television all the time, and the number of cases where they spend most of the programme in the room, glancing at the set only infrequently.

Figure 2:
Distributions of presence and looking



Percentage of time present (O——O) and looking at the TV (O---O).

In addition to asking people to estimate their presence and looking, they were also invited to rate each programme for enjoyment and impact (Collett and Lamb, 1986). These two measures were included on the suggestion of Mallory Wober at the I.B.A. When the observed values for presence and looking were correlated with the reported values for enjoyment and impact it was found that

the relations between all four variables were positive and significant. This is shown in Figure 3. However there are at least two conclusions that can be drawn from this figure. One is that there is a strong network of relations between the ways that people behave during programmes and the effects these programmes are reported to have on them. The other conclusion, which I must confess to favour, is that although the correlations between the measures are significant, their explanatory power is rather weak. Those of you who have had the misfortune to be dragged through an introductory course of statistics may remember that the amount of variance accounted for by a correlation - in other words the degree to which one variable 'explains' another - can be calculated by squaring the correlation.

Figure 3:
Correlations between observed and reported variables

	Looking	Enjoyment	Impact
Presence	0.21 p = 0.000	0.22 p = 0.000	0.14 p = 0.000
Looking		0.32 p = 0.000	0.27 p = 0.000
Enjoyment			0.51 p = 0.000
(n = 281)			

Looked at in this light it becomes immediately apparent that although the correlations between the observed and the reported variables are significant, they don't go very far to explain each other. Of course one might expect a correlation between presence, on the one hand, and enjoyment or impact on the other to be low, simply because people may switch on the TV part of the way through a programme which subsequently gives them a great deal of enjoyment, or which makes an enduring impression on them. But this kind of allowance cannot be extended to looking, because looking is calculated as a proportion of

the time that people spend in the room, and not as a proportion of total programme length. For this reason there are good prima facie grounds for expecting the correlations between looking and the reported variables of enjoyment and impact to be higher than the correlations between presence and the reported variables, and that of course is what one finds. But this difference between presence and looking is overshadowed by the fact that even where looking is concerned the amount of variance explained by the correlations does not exceed 10%. This means, in effect, that more than 90% of the variance in presence and looking needs to be explained in terms of factors other than the reported effects that programmes have on people.

Family life and television

One of the reasons why the relationship between TV watching and the effects that people report is so weak is that people are not always able to give the television their undivided attention. When two people are watching TV together it is not uncommon for one person to initiate an activity which disturbs the other person's concentration. In some cases the person who is disturbed will willingly relinquish the TV for another activity, but in other cases he or she will only do so reluctantly. The most frequent cases of interrupted viewing seem to be those where children make demands on parents who are watching the TV. For example, children will enter the room with their toys, insisting that their parents stop watching the TV and join them in a game, or they will clamber on to their mother's lap while she is watching the news and ask for a bed-time story. Parents have developed a whole range of strategies for dealing with these disruptions. One strategy is for parents to openly concede to the child's demands but to continue to watch the television while keeping up a pretence of giving the child their undivided attention. A more direct approach is for parents to reject the child's demands, with or without offering the child an explanation about the overriding importance of the programme. Another trick is to deflect the child's

interruption with a promise - for example, "I'll read you a story when the programme is over".

The area immediately in front of the television has become the latest battleground in which family disputes are fought and won. Here there are skirmishes over whether the TV should be switched on, mobilisations by children who want to watch the late-night movie, and set-piece battles over channel choice. The arrival of the remote control has completely transformed disagreements over channel choice, particularly in families that only have one set and no VCR. Whereas previously it was possible for family members to countermand each other's choices by pressing buttons on the television set, it is now the person who is in possession of the remote control who is able to dictate which channel others will be able to watch. Not surprisingly, the remote control has become a totem of family authority, a fact which is illustrated by the physical tussles that take place over the remote control, and the way it is jealously guarded by family members who wish to deny others access to an alternative channel. The video material we have collected contains numerous examples of disagreement over channel choice which are settled by one person gaining possession of the remote control and keeping it away from others. Some of the fights that take place over the remote control are clearly due to the sheer novelty of the device, but others reflect the enduring disagreements that people have over television and the constant challenges to authority that are part of family life.

Debunking television's myths

It is a sad fact that almost everything we know about television has come from asking people questions about their viewing habits and opinions, or from running them through experiments. The problem with asking people questions is that they may not be able to describe their actions reliably, or they may choose to offer accounts which they deem to be acceptable to the investigator. The

problem with experiments is that they place people in totally artificial situations and therefore eliminate the complex interplay of factors to which people are normally exposed when they are watching television. Observation methods, on the other hand, are not hampered by the biases inherent in question-asking and experimentation, although they do have their own problems.

Participant observation, for example, is limited by the fact that the presence of an investigator may disturb existing viewing practices within the family, and by the fact that it is often beyond the capacity of a participant observer to assimilate and record what is happening in front of the television, especially when several members of the family are present. Although participant observation is dedicated to the investigation of what people do, rather than what they say they do, it frequently produces unsubstantiated generalisations about the effects of television. This is particularly evident in some of the casual observations that have been made by psychologists. Jerome Singer (1970), for example, has claimed that "the constant movement and pattern of change that characterize the screen produces a continuous series of orienting reflexes in us, and it is hard to habituate to the set". The video material we have collected shows that this simply is not the case. True, there are occasions where people are totally transfixed by the television, and where their eyes are literally glued to the screen, but there are also occasions where people completely ignore the TV and where, for all the attention it gets, it might as well be switched off.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1973) has gone even further than Singer, insisting that "the major impact of television is not the behavior it produces, but the behavior it prevents. When the television set is on it freezes everybody; they're all expressionless, focussing on the image on the screen, and everything that used to go on between people - the games, the arguments, the emotional scenes, out of which personality and ability develop - is stopped. So when you turn on television, you turn off the process of making human beings human". Three

suspect claims are being made here - first, that television 'freezes' people, second that they are all expressionless when they watch TV, and third that television watching is incompatible with the socialisation of children. As far as the first of these claims is concerned, there is ample evidence to show that people are not immobilised by the television. Admittedly there are times when they remain motionless, but there are also times when they perform other activities while the television is switched on. Some of these activities, like reading the newspaper or necking on the couch, are usually performed with total disregard for what is on the screen, but other activities, like eating or knitting, are commonly performed as an adjunct to TV viewing. Whether these activities complement or conflict with TV viewing, they show that people are not frozen by television. Their sheer frequency also casts doubt on the widespread belief that television mesmerises people.

Bronfenbrenner's second claim, that people become expressionless when watching TV, is nothing more than a caricature. The fact of the matter is, people produce an enormous range of facial expressions while watching television: they laugh, smile, cry, grimace, and respond emotionally in a variety of ways[3]. They also talk a great deal. A lot of the conversation that takes place while the TV is on is related to what is happening on the screen - people discuss the news, complain about the weather reports, swap gossip about the actors and pass comments on the commercials. But a good proportion of the talk that occurs while the set is switched on has nothing to do with television - people discuss the day's events, what they're going to have for dinner, where they're going on holiday and who's going to deal with the children. In homes where there are children, most of the talk that occurs during the early evening is devoted to their needs - for example, persuading the children to eat their supper, refereeing

3. Bronfenbrenner's remark about the absence of expression in TV viewers is echoed in Marie Winn's (1977) fatuous suggestion that, when watching television, "the child's facial expression is transformed. The jaw is relaxed, and hangs open slightly; the tongue rests on the front teeth (if there are any). The eyes have a glazed vacuous look".

their arguments and cajoling them to go to bed. The fact that so much activity takes place around the television is hardly surprising, especially when one considers how long the TV is switched on each day, because if people remained frozen and silent whenever the set was switched on they would never manage to get anything done. More importantly, family life would grind to a complete halt.

Bronfenbrenner's final suggestion, that television hinders the process whereby human beings are made human, also deserves critical examination, because, like his other claims, it turns out to be based on inadequate acquaintance with what actually happens when children watch television. The video material contains numerous instances where children are watching television with their parents. On these occasions it is not uncommon for parents to use the TV as an educational device - either by quizzing their children about what is happening on the screen, or by instructing them on how particular scenes should be understood. One of the complaints about television is that it is used as a surrogate babysitter. Certainly is does sometimes fulfil this function, but the fact that parents use television to alert their children to factual and moral issues shows that it does serve an important role in socialising children and turning them into fully fledged human beings.

A great deal of the received wisdom about the television audience is based on preconceived ideas, the application of inappropriate research methods, and superficial acquaintance with what actually happens in front of the television. All we can ever hope to gain from the testimony of TV viewers is an understanding of the theories they entertain about their viewing habits, and all we can hope to gain from experiments is a picture of how viewers might behave if the world were a simple as the conditions in which we place them. Even casual observation, which promises to provide the basis for a proper ethnography of audience behaviour, is prone to certain errors and, as we have seen, to the perpetuation of myths about the effects of television.

Recording techniques like video have a distinct advantage over participant observation, not only because they do away with the obtrusive presence of an investigator, but because they produce a record which can repeatedly be explored for patterns of viewing activity. Video does however have certain problems. One problem is that people may become self-conscious when they know that they are being recorded, although as we have seen this happens far less frequently than one might expect. In addition, although video can record how people look at the screen, it only provides occasional clues as to whether they are listening to the TV sound-track. It is worth noting, however, that this drawback is not peculiar to video recording: it is common to most research methods.

The unique advantages of video heavily outweigh its disadvantages. Using video it is possible to discover how people relate to television in the privacy of their own homes. It is possible to study their presence and attention to the screen, their use of VCRs and remote controls, their responses to commercials and different types of programmes, and the remarks they make to others and , on occasion, to the television itself. Only by gaining access to people's homes, and by recording the routines and rituals associated with TV watching, can we ever hope to understand the role that television plays in people's lives, and the effects that it has on them.

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